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Is it Time to Jump off the Sustainability Bandwagon?

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ABSTRACT: Almost thirty years after its initial use in the Brundtland Report, the concept of "sustainability" has become ubiquitous within business, with virtually every company division across a broad range of industries developing "sustainable" models and practices. While the original Brundtland idea of sustainable development has the potential to do much good in guiding business practice, this potential is being undermined by the systematic misuse, misunderstanding, and flawed application of the concept in many business settings. Under the guise of sustainability, business is being asked to do both less than and more than what should be required by a commitment to sustainable development. As a result, serious ethical and practical questions go unanswered, questions that must be addressed before sustainability can become a meaningful business strategy. This address situates sustainable business within its original context of sustainable development and argues against attempts to convert sustainability either into a narrow concept of risk management or into a broad concept of social responsibility. It then lays out a sustainability research agenda that helps us understand how to create businesses that can meet present and future needs without jeopardizing future generations via the destruction of the biosphere.

KEY WORDS: sustainability, conservationism, biocentrism, risk management, triple bottom line, Global Reporting Initiative

IN THEIR 1987 REPORT, "Our Common Future," the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (the "Brundtland Commission") called for a new model of global economic development. The Brundtland Report offered what has become the conventional definition of sustainable development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.[1] The Brundtland Report addressed economic development in global terms because the economic, environmental, and ethical challenges it addressed were global in scope. Yet while this original application was at the macro-economic level, the Brundtland Report was also intended to have significant implications for business at the micro-level.

Almost 30 years after the Brundtland Report, "sustainable" is regularly used today to modify an innumerable range of distinct and diverse activities, ranging from agriculture and architecture to zoning and zoos. Similarly, the noun "sustainability" has

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become a generic stand-alone concept, as well as a term modified by such diverse adjectives as economic, environmental, social, ecological, corporate, financial, global, human, and organizational.[2]

Sustainability has become ubiquitous within business, with virtually every division including management, marketing, investing, accounting, strategy, and operations developing sustainable models and practices. It is difficult to find a major corporation that does not issue an annual sustainability report; by one account 95% of the Global 250 issue annual sustainability reports.[3] Cottage industries have arisen in such areas as sustainability consulting, ranking, investing and measurement. Major consulting firms including Ernst and Young, Deloitte, Accenture, PwC, and KPMG, and countless advocacy groups and NGOs, have created significant business ventures in sustainability consulting, advising businesses on how to become more sustainable. Forbes magazine, in conjunction with Global Knights Capital, publishes an annual ranking of the top 100 sustainable firms, the "Global100." Virtually every brokerage and investment firm offers a sustainable portfolio, with the Dow Jones Sustainability Index perhaps the most widely used sustainability investing guide. Similar to the Global100, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) has created a sustainability measurement and assessment tool that is widely used by business and NGOs throughout the world. Another well-known major benchmarking framework is the "triple bottom line" (TBL), now widely cited in management literature and in sustainability consulting.

It is prudent to be cautious whenever a concept, especially one that claims significant ethical implications, becomes so popular among such a wide range of people and institutions. While I believe that the original Brundtland idea of sustainable development has the potential to do much good in guiding business practice, I believe that this potential is being undermined by the systematic misuse, misunderstanding and flawed application of the concept in many business settings. Under the guise of sustainability, business is being asked to do both less than and more than what should be required by the commitment to sustainable development. As a result, serious ethical and practical questions that must be addressed before sustainability can become a meaningful business strategy go unanswered. The question needs to be asked: "Is it time for business to jump off the sustainability bandwagon?"

BRUNDTLAND'S ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Brundtland Commission's concern with sustainable development arose at a time in which evidence was mounting that worldwide economic development, then understood almost exclusively in terms of GDP *growth*, was approaching the bio-physical limits imposed by the biosphere in which that growth occurred. The Brundtland Commission argued that a model of economic development in which undifferentiated growth is taken as the end of economic activity and in which less developed countries were advised simply to "get richer," was failing to address the real needs of hundreds of millions of people while at the same time placing long-term environmental productivity in jeopardy. The Brundtland Report was instrumental in shifting attention away from an exclusively quantitative interpretation of economic development to one that stressed the qualitative dimension.

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Some considerable ethical foundations are implicit in this discussion. As the Brundtland Commission pointed out, the goal of economic development should be to "improve the lot" of all people, but not simply by helping them "get richer," but by meeting the needs of the hundreds of millions of people who lack adequate food, water, shelter, and security. Economic activity that did not meet human needs, or that compromised the productive capacity of the earth's biosphere so that future needs could not be met, was unacceptable.

Thus, along with economic development and environmental protection, ethical considerations were a part of their work from the beginning. As articulated by the Brundtland Commission, both the economic and the environmental aspects of sustainable development are means to the end of human well-being, specifically meeting human needs in both present and future. Accordingly, while the concept of sustainable development is commonly said to encompass three dimensions—the "three pillars" of economics, environment, ethics—the ethical dimension is better understood as the foundation upon which both economic and environmental policy rests.

The Brundtland Report was not a treatise in philosophy, so we should not expect to find a sophisticated treatment of ethics presented. But we can plausibly sketch its ethical foundations. The Brundtland Report is an essay in distributive justice, specifically judging the distribution of economic goods and services by how well it meets the needs of the least advantaged. The Brundtland Report is also an essay in intergenerational justice in that it concerned with justice not only to presently living humans, but to future generations as well.

It is this focus on the satisfaction of needs rather than of expressed preferences, which distinguishes Brundtland's qualitative interpretation of economic development from the quantitative and utilitarian interpretations of economic growth found in standard market accounts. The standard interpretation of economic development as economic growth seeks an increase in overall wealth as a measure of overall happiness. By focusing on the needs of the least advantaged, Brundtland's distributive justice offers an alternative to the collectivist utilitarianism of growth-based economics.

There is also an environmental ethics implicit in this framework. In the vocabulary of the discipline, sustainable development's environmentalism is anthropocentric and conservationist. From the perspective of sustainable development, the value of the natural world derives from how it serves human needs and how effectively and efficiently these resources are used in this capacity. It is an ethics of environmental stewardship rather than environmental preservation. Consistent with the prevailing economic growth model, but differing from those who attribute an intrinsic value to the natural world, this account is anthropocentric in that the value of the natural world derives from how it is used to serve human ends.[4] It is conservationist in that it advocates a more conservative stewardship of those resources than is found in the prevailing model, which has given little or no notice to the environmental context for economic growth. We can therefore summarize these ethical foundations as (1) a needs-based account of intergenerational distributive justice, and (2) an anthropocentric, conservationist environmental ethics.

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These starting points have significant philosophical pedigrees and are not without problems. But if only on an intuitive level, the ethical foundations of the Brundtland Report are appealing and this intuitive appeal likely explains much of the widespread acceptance of the idea of sustainable development. Basic needs have an ethical priority over desires or preferences; the needs of future generations deserve moral consideration; the needs of both present and future people are being jeopardized by an economic model that is putting the earth's productive capacity at risk.

ASKING SUSTAINABILITY TO DO TOO LITTLE: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS RISK MANAGEMENT

Sustainable development is, thus, a normative concept, suggesting a direction or norm that should guide practical decision-making in public policy and economics. Building from this starting point, the appeal to sustainability plays a justificatory and *normative* role in most contemporary business settings where to describe an activity as sustainable is to justify and approve it. To characterize something as sustainable is also to provide a motivational component: it is a commendable thing; people get credit for doing it. Conceptually, of course, this need not be true. Beside this normative connotation, "sustainability" also has a *descriptive* connotation in which it means simply the capacity to continue long-term. To be sustainable in this descriptive sense is to be capable of continuing over an extended period. We could, for example, talk of the sustainability of predatory lending, Ponzi schemes, excessive executive compensation, or of the war on terror.

This ambiguity helps us recognize that the normative force of "sustainable" will come from the concept it modifies. Sustainable *development* is normative in that it refers to economic activity that serves the ethical end of human well-being, and *sustainable* development seeks to do this is a stable and on-going manner.

Whenever the adjective "sustainable" is divorced from "development," and turned into the noun "sustainability," we are well advised to look deeper and ask *what* is to be sustained and ask *why* should it be sustained? In the words of philosopher J. L. Austin, "sustainable" is a "substantive-hungry" word, calling out for a noun to be characterized and when turned into a noun itself, it becomes misleading if not meaningless.[5]

Much of the appeal of sustainability within business contexts can be explained by a failure to distinguish descriptive from normative uses of the term. The attractiveness that sustainability holds for many businesses lies in the fact that it is interpreted in the descriptive sense and thus interpreted as little more than a risk-management strategy. When used only in this descriptive sense, a claim that some business activity is sustainable is no more deserving of ethical approbation than a criminal who claims that his Ponzi scheme is sustainable. One can readily find many such examples, but I will mention only two. Ernst and Young promotes their sustainability consulting by appeal to "improved reputation," "access to capital," "increased efficiencies," as well as "avoiding and mitigating environmental and social risks."[6]

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The Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI), as another example, is even more explicit in this regard.

> Corporate Sustainability is a business approach that creates long-term shareholder value by embracing opportunities and managing risks deriving from economic, environmental and social developments.[7]

DJSI's European partner, RobecoSAM, elaborates on this description further:

> No doubt contemporary business is confronted with a broad range of environmental risks, ranging from climate change to resource depletion, and social risks, ranging from labor supply to corruption within a supply chain. Risk management is a challenge for all firms and effective managers analyze the environmental and social risks facing the firm.[8]

But managing risks in order to increase the likelihood of financial success is an altogether different normative foundation than the ethics implicit in the Brundtland Commission vision. Depending on the firm and its activities, long-term economic survival may, or may not, contribute to sustainable development in an ethical sense. A descriptively sustainable business may, or may not, conform to sustainable development's ethical norm of meeting needs without compromising on-going environmental productivity. Treating sustainability as a risk management strategy therefore asks business to do too little in serving the ethical ends of sustainable development.

An important thing to note about this risk management interpretation of sustainability is that it assumes a link between beneficial (or at least benign) environmental initiatives and economic success, the former being a means to the end of the latter.[9] Thus, the ethical status of the risk-management approach will stand or fall on the depth of the connection between normatively sustainable activities and business success.

Two questions follow from the alleged connection between environmental responsibility and risk-management. Is it true, in fact, that long-term shareholder value will be served, and risks mitigated, by adopting the type of sustainable practices envisioned in the Brundtland Report? Second, even if this is true, are there other more cost-effective means for attaining those same risk-management goals? To secure a connection between normatively sustainable activities and long-term business success—to successfully manage risks by adopting environmentally sounds practices—the answer to the first question must be "yes," and to the second question "no." If long-term shareholder value is not served by the type of environmentally sustainable activity envisioned by Brundtland, then the risk-management advice would be for business to move in other directions, likewise, if a business can find more cost effective means than the sustainable approach for attaining that end.

We should also recognize that these are empirical not conceptual questions. They cannot be answered by definition, in principle, for all firms in all situations. Because this connection is empirical, one can imagine cases in which an environmental responsibility runs counter to the firm's long-term self-interest. It will all depend on the particular firm, its products and services, the industry in which it exists, and

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the environmental impact of the individual firm, the industry and, in fact, the entire surrounding economy and ecosystem.

To the degree that certain products or industries are destructive of the biosphere's ability to support human life, they will need to change and that product or industry will be threatened by a move towards sustainable development. After all, the force of the Brundtland Commission recommendations was that the status quo was unsustainable. One could imagine many individual firms, if not entire industries, that will and should face great risks from the environmentally sustainable economy. To the degree that present production and consumption patterns, particularly those found in consumer-driven industrial economies, are causing environmental deterioration, the status quo is exactly what needs to change.

Promoting business sustainability simply as a risk management strategy suggests that any firm can become sustainable. Of course, one way to mitigate risks created by environmental challenges would be to adopt more environmentally benign practices and evolve into a new type of firm. But this is only one way. We cannot assume that every firm or every industry can or will adapt in this way. Other risk management strategies, not the least of which involves corporate political activity such as lobbying, funding climate change deniers, and otherwise participating in the political arena to counter the sustainable development agenda, are open to firms threatened by a sustainable future.

To restate, when we hear talk about "sustainability," we should always be prepared to ask "*What* is being sustained?" and most importantly, "How does that product, that firm, that industry, contribute to an economically just future by meeting present and future needs in an environmentally sound manner?" Without an answer to this question, the normative and ethical justification of an appeal to sustainability is lost. Treating sustainability simply as a risk-management strategy divorces the concept from its ethical foundations and thus expects too little of business.

ASKING SUSTAINABILITY TO DO TOO MUCH: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

If treating sustainability as a risk management strategy asks too little of business, much of what passes as sustainability among its advocates asks too much. The ethical dimension of sustainability is narrower than what is often claimed, especially as it is thought to apply to business. I will also argue that the environmental dimension is much more narrow than often construed.

Over time the ethical responsibilities underlying the original Brundtland Commission recommendations have morphed into a more general prescription for "social" responsibility.

One can find many examples of this over-extension. I'll mention only three. The first comes from The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). GRI is the foremost advocate for corporate sustainability reporting that works closely with various United Nations programs and is the leading example of sustainability measurement. GRI has created a Sustainability Reporting Framework to help businesses measure their sustainability performance by providing "metrics and methods for measuring and reporting sustainability-related impacts and performance."[10]

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GRI adopts the common practice of dividing sustainability into the "three pillars" of an economic, environmental, and ethical dimension. The economic dimension of the GRI framework consists of metrics that measure "the organization's impacts on the economic conditions of its stakeholders, and on economic systems at local, national, and global levels." The environmental dimension "concerns the organization's impact on living and non-living natural systems, including land, air, water and ecosystems [and] covers impacts related to inputs (such as energy and water) and outputs (such as emissions, effluents and waste)."[11] "Impact" is a vague term and can suggest a very wide range of responsibilities. But while these are broad interpretations of what is involved in economic and environmental aspects of sustainability, they are not as broad as the ethical dimension. According to the GRI,

> The social dimension of sustainability concerns the impacts the organization has on the social systems within which it operates. The Social Category includes the sub-Categories: Labor Practices and Decent Work; Human Rights; Society; Product Responsibility. Most of the content in the sub-Categories is based on internationally recognized universal standards or other relevant international references.[12]

These standards includes the United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights;" the "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;" the "International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights;" various International Labor Organization (ILO) declarations on workplace rights, as well as responsibilities to local community engagement, initiatives to counter corruption and anti-competitive behavior, commitments to product safety, ethical marketing, and ethical sourcing.

How broad is this conception? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes rights to, among other things, "rest and leisure," and a right to "enjoy the arts," and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights includes rights "to form and join labor unions," a "right to strike," a right to "free education," "social security," and "paid parental leave." In short, the ethical dimension described by the GRI might fairly be described as a generic theory of corporate social responsibility and looks very similar to the range of topics covered in a typical business ethics course.

The Corporate Knights Global 100 ranking, similar to the GRI framework, also incorporates many thoughtful and imaginative environmental measures, including metrics for energy, carbon, water, and waste productivity (revenues generated per unit of energy and water used and per unit of carbon and waste produced). Among the Global 100's social metrics are percentage of tax paid, ratio of CEO to average worker salary, stability of pension funds, workplace safety rates, employee turnover, and diversity of leadership.

Consider also how sustainability has been interpreted by some business-related professional societies. The Society of Human Resource Managers (SHRM) advocates for a sustainable workplace which is to "include examining employee carbon footprint, offering occupational wellness programs and stress-reducing strategies (e.g., nap rooms, on-site massages and stretch breaks), and providing wellness-related benefits such as on-site gyms. Maintaining a sustainable workplace also means minimizing external environmental impact—for example, by purchasing repurposed and

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recycled materials, minimizing unnecessary employee travel, and reducing energy and water consumption."[13] The American Institute of CPAs (AICPA), for example, straightforwardly identifies sustainability with corporate social responsibility. Their explanation of sustainability is:

> Sometimes used interchangeably with the term corporate social responsibility, the most widely accepted definition of sustainability that has emerged over time is the "triple bottom-line" consideration of 1) economic viability, 2) social responsibility, and 3) environmental responsibility.[14]

To say that these applications of sustainability ask business to do too much is to say that many of them are not an essential part of an environmentally sustainable economy. However, not every socially responsible act, nor every environmentally responsible act, belongs as a part of sustainability agenda. One could imagine a society, even a global one, in which present and future needs were met in an environmentally safe way without also recognizing widespread commitments to civil rights, labor rights, or other socially desirable ends.

In these and many other cases, the Brundtland understanding of sustainable development has evolved from a model of global economic development into a wider understanding of a "social development" or "social sustainability." The United Nations now regularly uses the phrase "social development," in contexts wherever sustainable development and "sustainability" is used. For example, on the United Nation website, sustainable development is now characterized in the following way:

> Defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), sustainable development has emerged as the guiding principle for long-term global development. Consisting of three pillars, sustainable development seeks to achieve, in a balanced manner, economic development, social development and environmental protection. [15]

There is a plausible historical explanation for this evolution. Agenda 21, the development plan that came out of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the "Rio Summit") in 1992, five years after the Brundtland Report, began to focus on some of the environmental, social and political conditions that are necessary to secure needs. So, for example, if present and future needs include food and water, then fertile soil, prevention of desertification, and access to drinking water are some of the secondary goods essential to secure basic needs. But the understanding of social development has continued to expand. Given the United Nation's own agenda for a wide range of human rights, including the Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, it is not surprising that that institution would seek to broaden the normative implication of sustainable development. The United Nations' goal of making the world a better place is simply broader than the Brundtland Commission's goal of sustainable development.

But consider what has happened here. The Brundtland Commission Report called for a new model of *economic* development on the grounds that the present economic

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growth model's disregard for environmental factors was jeopardizing its ability to meet human needs, both in the present and future. The end was intergenerational justice and the means was a more environmentally conservative economy. Today, those ethical ends have been transformed into a generic social agenda—something called "social development"—that stands as one of three equal foundational "pillars" of a single concept: sustainability.

Once again we find a tendency to divorce the modifier "sustainable" from any specific noun and turn it into the stand-alone concept of "sustainability." This suggests that sustainability can be achieved only if we adopt a particular social vision—something called "social development," a vision that includes labor rights, rights to leisure and the arts, paid parental leave, free education, controlled CEO pay, etc. But why assume that this social vision is connected in any way with the concept of sustainability, in either the normative or descriptive sense? One can understand why economic development cannot be sustainable over the long term without certain environmental conditions, but there is little reason to think that society cannot be sustainable over the long term without an entire array of social and ethical goods. At the very least, these are altogether different questions.

In response, one could argue that the concept of "needs" as found in the original Brundtland report includes all the rights and social goods included in these expanded conceptions of social development. One could argue that people need labor rights, paid parental leave, controlled CEO pay, diverse leadership, and occupational wellness programs. But this move risks turning the intuitively plausible account of needs into an expansive understanding of any strongly held preference.

Such an expansion of ethical responsibilities from a narrow focus on economic development into a wider interest in social development is problematic for philosophical, practical, and ethical reasons. First, unlike the concept of economic development, which has a fairly well-established meaning, a general concept of "social development" is at best unclear and at worst question-begging for a wide range of ethical and social issues. We would at least need arguments in support, for example, of the view that a society that controls CEO pay or grants paid parental leave, is more "developed" and "sustainable" than one that does not.

Beyond these conceptual confusions, the philosophical justifications for pursuing a narrow model of sustainable economic development and a broader model of social development are different. The philosophical arguments supporting a theory of justice aimed at meeting needs, responsibilities to future generations, and a conservationist environmental ethic, are different from those supporting labor rights, responsibilities to local communities, and workplace diversity. Collapsing them all into a generic use of "sustainability" or "social development" confuses this fact. There may well be good ethical reasons for business to respect labor rights and engage with their local community, but they are decidedly different reasons than those supporting sustainable development.

Second, there are also practical dangers in that firms that otherwise might be inclined to support the sustainable development agenda will be turned off or distracted by the broader social agenda of such things as paid parental leave, labor rights, executive compensation, and the like. Nor should firms get a free pass on

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their responsibilities in a sustainable economy because they treat employees well, contribute to their local communities, or fulfill general social obligations.

Third, we should also be clear about these differences simply as a matter of intellectual and ethical integrity. Advocates of sustainable development should avoid a type of reverse green-washing in which a range of unrelated social concerns are smuggled into the call for sustainable development. John Elkington, of triple bottom line fame, admits to doing just that. In a 2008 interview, Elkington responded to a question about how he developed the idea of triple bottom line as follows:

> I think quite a number of multinational corporations, in particular US corporations, were quite spooked by the whole social agenda and actively steering away from it. So "triple bottom line" was very consciously business language, trying to get under the guard of business people. It's almost a Trojan horse trying to give them a sense that this was something that they wanted to play with and subscribe to. Once they started to use the language and commit to it to some degree, we could then define it in ways that could stretch their imaginations a little. That's how it went down.[16]

In other words, it was justifiable to mislead and manipulate business for the greater good of some unspecified and hidden social agenda.

ASKING SUSTAINABILITY TO DO TOO MUCH: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

If expansion of the ethical dimension of sustainable development into a general social development is confusing, expanding it into a more general concept of environmental sustainability can actually detract from the sustainable development agenda. From the start, many environmentalists were skeptical of the sustainability movement, criticizing Brundtland's conservationist approach for failing to acknowledge important environmental goods, duties, and virtues.[17]

At its core, the environmental pillar of sustainable development rests on a conservationist environmentalism, which treats the natural world as a means to human ends, important ends to be sure, but human ends nonetheless. This conservationist agenda emphasizes such environmental responsibilities as protection of clean air and water, conservative use of non-renewable resources and a shift towards renewable energy sources. Basic needs such as food, water, shelter, health and responsibility to future generations give rise to a concern with such issues as pollution, desertification, renewable energy, resource use, climate change.

Not all environmentalists would agree with this emphasis. The so-called "deep ecology" movement rejects as "shallow" the conservationist approach that underlies Brundtland in favor of a broader biocentric and preservationist agenda. Biocentric environmentalists, for example, those who believe that non-human animals deserve ethical consideration, reject the anthropocentric approach to environmentalism that is embedded in sustainable development. Preservationists who believe that there is an intrinsic value in the natural world, whether it lies in the moral status of animals, the aesthetic or spiritual values of wilderness areas, or in the diversity of species, reject the conservationist approach which values nature only instrumentally.

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In many contemporary settings the anthropocentric and conservationist foundations for sustainable development are often replaced by conceptions of sustainability that encompass the entire biocentric and preservationist range of environmental concerns. In much the same way that the ethical dimension has morphed into generic social development, or social sustainability, the environmental dimension has morphed into a generic environmental sustainability. One can find some very good and focused work on the environmental responsibilities of sustainable business by such institutional players as the GRI, the World Bank, Global Knights and others. But one will also find a common tendency to expand the range of environmental responsibilities to include almost any human impact on the natural environment. The GRI, for example, describes the environmental dimension this way:

> The environmental dimension of sustainability concerns the organization's impact on living and non-living natural systems, including land, air, water and ecosystems. The Environmental Category covers impacts related to inputs (such as energy and water) and outputs (such as emissions, effluents and waste). In addition, it covers biodiversity, transport, and product and service-related impacts, as well as environmental compliance and expenditures.[18]

Many of the specific metrics developed by GRI are reasonable, emphasizing a concern with standard conservationist issues of resource use and pollution. But the description of "impact on living and non-living natural systems" is too general. In particular, the implicit suggestion seems to be that any human impact on the natural world is, if not environmentally wrong, at least something to be avoided or minimized. Any and every human activity will impact the natural world and expecting any organization to limit, or measure such impacts, seems to ask too much, especially if this requires making a trade-off with meeting present human needs.

The case against collapsing the environmental dimension of sustainable development into a more generic environmental sustainability parallels the case against collapsing the ethical dimension into a more generic social development or social sustainability. The underlying rationales and ends are different, and there are philosophical, conceptual, and practical reasons not to confuse the two.

Like social sustainability, environmental sustainability is conceptually confusing. What, exactly, is to be sustained by environmental sustainability? The earth and its natural environment existed for billions of years before humans evolved and will exist for untold eons after them. If anything is sustainable regardless of any and all human acts, it is the natural environment. Drawing any practical or ethical conclusions from a generic idea of environmental sustainability is nonsensical without an account of what elements of the natural environment should be sustained, and why.

The sustainable development agenda answers these questions by connecting the natural world to human needs. In this context, environmental sustainability is based on a conservationist ethic in which the natural world can and should be used, prudently and efficiently, to meet human needs. Arguments can and have been made to support a wider biocentric and preservationist agenda. As Brundtland acknowledged, good reasons beyond utility can be given for protecting many endangered species and preserving biodiversity and wilderness areas for their own sake. They are just

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different arguments from those that support sustainable development and they should not be confused with, or smuggled into, the sustainable development agenda.

An organization committed to the goals of sustainable development should not for that reason alone be expected to adopt the wider agenda of the animal rights or preservationist environmentalism, and should avoid those aspects to the degree that they jeopardize our ability to meet present and future human needs. But perhaps more importantly, collapsing the conservationist approach of Brundtland into a more general environmentalism will mask substantial conflicts that can have significant implications for business. Such conflicts can be seen in a wide range of issues, from preserving biodiversity and habitat to wilderness preservation, and from industrial agriculture, farming and fishing, to GMO foods. For example, conserving biodiversity was one of Brundtland's primary environmental categories and it plays a major role in how the GRI and the World Bank conceptualize environmental sustainability. Brundtland offered several reasons for preserving biodiversity, including: the expanding role that genetic reservoirs play in development; the function that diverse life forms play in life-supporting biophysical and climate processes; the important food, drug and medicinal uses of biological and genetic materials; and the biological role in providing raw material for industry. In a well-known aside, Brundtland acknowledged that, "utility aside, there are also moral, ethical, cultural, aesthetic, and purely scientific reasons for conserving wild beings."[19] I would argue that it is clear from the context that theirs remained a conservationist agenda despite using language often more at home in ecocentric, biocentric, preservationist environmentalism. Immediately preceding the acknowledgment of other values, Brundtland points out that "wild species contributes billions of dollars yearly to the world economy in the form of improved crop species, new drugs and medicines, and raw materials for industry."

Exactly what responsibilities towards biodiversity and endangered species would follow from a commitment to sustainable development? The answer depends on which species is endangered. Preserving such species as rice, wheat, or native grains would be an important goal of sustainable development. Preserving Bengal tigers, jaguars, black rhinos, or the giant panda seems, frankly, irrelevant to the goals of sustainable development. The case is even less clear for obscure and less well-known plant, insect, bacteria or fungi species. There is little reason to think that present and future human needs depend on preserving all of the present diversity of animal and plant species. For an obvious example, it would seem to be an ethically good thing, if not an ethical imperative, to hasten the extinction of such things as the smallpox, Ebola and HIV viruses, as well as the bacteria that cause cholera, tuberculosis, and salmonella. This example shows that a conservationist environmentalism serving human needs is different from a general preservationist environmentalism. Greater problems arise when the difference is more a matter of conflict than mere disparity. For example, a general goal to preserve biodiversity might conflict with a specific goal to increase crop production by introducing a monocultural agriculture, especially one using non-native or genetically modified plants or animals.

Perhaps nowhere can the tensions between the ethical dimension of sustainable development and a broader environmentalism be seen than in the area of food

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and agriculture. The production, distribution, and access to food and water, food and water quality and safety, food types (meat? beef? organic? local? processed?), diet and nutrition, cultural aspects of food, and food and such technologies as genetically modified organisms, synthetic biology (synthetic meat!), synthetic fertilizers and pesticides all raise issues at the boundary of sustainable development and a broader environmentalism.

As Brundtland reminds us, the green revolution of the twentieth century allowed food production to outpace global population growth. Global food production today remains highly dependent on irrigation, synthetic chemicals, fossil fuels, factory farms and fisheries, and GMOs. Given that we are barely meeting the food needs of the present by using such technologies—if in fact we are meeting those needs— it is unrealistic to think that moving to a more environmentally benign agriculture, at least in the short term, would result in anything other than widespread starvation and malnourishment.

Yet there are risks to present and future human beings associated with most elements of modern, high-tech agricultural practices. Many legal pesticides have been known to cause cancer in animals, and have been associated with various forms of cancer, birth defects or other reproductive harms, and are known to impair child development. Several studies found a mixture of pesticide residues in the blood and urine of almost 100% of all persons sampled.[20] Given these considerable risks, a plausible case can and has been made that the present generation is compromising the ability of future generations to meet their food needs with such practices. Yet, there is equally strong evidence that changing such practices will compromise the present generation's ability to meet their needs.

But just at this point where more analysis and evaluation is needed, these discussions can be overwhelmed and debate silenced by wider environmental objections to technology-intensive agriculture. These objections range from loss of biodiversity, habitat and natural areas, mistreatment of animals, threats to native species, to the creation of non-natural "Frankenfoods," the concentration of power in the hands of a few global corporations, harm to local rural or indigenous communities, and lack of transparency in product labeling.

An example of where these tensions have virtually shut down debate is the case of so-called "golden rice." Vitamin A deficiency (VAD), which can lead to blindness and death, is a common occurrence among undernourished populations. The World Health Organization estimates that as many as 190 million children were affected by VAD in 2009.[21] Golden rice is a genetically modified rice that contains genes that synthesize beta-carotene, making the rice a significant source of vitamin A. Because rice is an inexpensive, readily available, and familiar food in many of the regions where VAD is prevalent, golden rice would seem an ideal solution to meet the needs of some of the world's poorest and malnourished people. Yet, because it is a GMO food opposition among many environmentalists has essentially put an end to golden rice production in many of the world's poorest regions. Greenpeace, for example, calls golden rice "environmentally irresponsible."

On sustainable development grounds, at least a plausible case can be made to support policies and actions in all of these areas that are in tension with more biocentric,

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preservationist environmentalism. Collapsing sustainable development's conservationist approach into a generic environmentalism cloaks the real tensions that can occur, it often silences the conservationist agenda by branding it as "environmentally irresponsible," it can dissuade those firms and industries which might otherwise support the sustainable development agenda, and it can obstruct the needed work that remains to be done.

One response to these observations would be to expand the concept of needs to include a wider range of environmental goods (as one could argue to expand the concept of needs for wider social goods). One could argue, for example, that future generations need the black rhino or Bengal tiger, or that they will need wilderness areas. But this again would expand the concept of needs beyond any recognizable understanding and, at least, require significant argumentation.

Another response to this analysis would appeal to a more ecological, holistic perspective and claim that the interconnectedness of the natural world provides anthropocentric and conservationist reasons for preserving all aspects of the natural world. Eco-centric theories of environmental ethics would make the case that in order to meet present and future human needs we must preserve healthy and functioning ecosystems and, by implication, preserve all components of these ecosystems.

The Brundtland Report itself sometimes moves in this direction. There are two versions of this counter-argument. The first argues that the interconnectedness of ecosystems would support a strong preservationist agenda: preserve natural ecosystems at all costs. The second supports a more cautionary approach: given the interconnectedness of the natural worlds, we should be cautious whenever we disrupt natural systems and always err on the side of preserving them.

While arguments have been made for the strong preservationist thesis, its conclusions are incompatible with sustainable development if they require sacrificing human needs in order to preserve nature. Any human activity, except perhaps some romanticized society of hunters and gatherers, disrupts the local ecosystem. A strict preservationist approach can and has been faulted for being misanthropic.[22]

The cautionary version of preservationism is a more reasonable approach but it, too, has problems. This approach relies on an argument from ignorance: we do not know what species are being lost and how such species function in the ecosystem, therefore we should tread lightly and cautiously.[23] But to counter a sustainable development agenda which transforms an ecosystem for agricultural purposes, for example, this argument would need to claim that unknown future needs override known present needs, a claim that I think is unfounded.

But at a deeper level, problems exist for the preservationist approach in specifying what exactly ought to be preserved, especially if that preservationist agenda requires moderating a conservationist agenda aimed at meeting present human needs. To say that humans need healthy and functioning ecosystems to survive is not to say that humans need all presently existing ecosystems to survive at current levels of development. Preservationists sometimes rely on a romanticized and western perspective on the natural world, holding that there is a natural balance, harmony, purpose, or functioning of nature. Even the cautionary preservationist approach shifts the burden of proof from sustainable conservationists and argues that any disruption of this

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natural balance stands in need of a justification. But ecosystems are more dynamic than this suggests; they are constantly undergoing change, extinctions are as natural as any other biological event.

In philosophical terms, implicit in much of the preservationist agenda is the teleological worldview that is unwarranted in a Darwinian world. From the perspective of less developed societies, preserving a natural ecosystem at the cost of meeting the needs of present people, especially when this call comes from those in cultures that have already fully exploited their own ecosystems to meet their own needs (and consumerist preferences), is unfair and unjust.[24]

A potential middle ground between the conservationist approach embedded in sustainable development and the preservationist approach of many environmentalists might still be found. While sustainable development cannot support preserving natural systems in some unchanged steady-state, the rate of human-caused change does seem to matter for the conservationist agenda. For example, climates do change, species do become extinct, and ecosystems do get disrupted naturally. But this does not mean that any and all change, especially at any rate over any timeframe, is without danger. The rate and extent of present climate change, species extinction, and ecosystem disruption may well be occurring in ways that meeting both present and future needs are compromised.

Thus, we might conclude that a more cautionary approach to disrupting ecosystems can be justified on prudential grounds, but it is a cautionary approach that can be overridden when such disruption does serve human needs. So, for example, disrupting the world's climate by emitting large amounts of carbon dioxide from coal-fired power plants is one thing ethically if those plants serve basic human needs in poor countries; it might be a different matter ethically when those plants serve the consumerist preferences in an industrialized country.

I should be clear that my position does not imply that any disruptions or destructions of natural systems are justified as long as they serve any human ends, nor that the status quo of industrial agriculture should always trump a more biocentric and preservationist agenda. But the tensions and trade-offs between the conservationist environmentalism implicit in Brundtland and a wider biocentric, preservationist environmentalism will require both normative and empirical analysis. My contention is that this needed analysis can be lost when the Brundtland approach is uncritically absorbed into a far-ranging notion of environmental sustainability. In the final section, I sketch some of the necessary research that awaits business ethics scholars.

FUTURE WORK IN BUSINESS ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

I call on my Society for Business Ethics (SBE) colleagues to leverage the traction gained by the ubiquity of "sustainability" in business contexts and, with a more focused and nuanced account, do the things that SBE members have done so well for so long: contribute good conceptual, normative, and empirical analysis and advice to business and society on some of the most important issues of the day.

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Conceptual Work

Many overlaps exist between sustainable development, business, and social political philosophy. The centrality of human needs for an account of justice, once so important to Plato, the Christian gospels, and Marx, has largely disappeared from contemporary social and political theory. Can it be revived? How might such theoretical perspectives such as John Rawls' "thin" theory of the good, a "thicker" theory of the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, or Henry's Shue's account of basic rights provide philosophical underpinning for environmentally threatened needs such as food, water, breathable air? What exactly do people "need"?

Similar overlaps exist between sustainable development, business ethics and fields such as public policy, economics, and environmental ethics. Are there sector-specific ethical responsibilities for business in entire sectors such as energy, food, health care? To what degree does the Brundtland approach represent an alternative to market-based solutions? How can we balance Brundtland's needs-based account of justice with property rights, liberty, autonomy, markets? Where do the various responsibilities of business, NGOs and government lie?

Normative Ethics

I believe that food ethics is an emerging new subfield of normative ethics that will have profound implications for business.[25] Is there a positive right to food, and what implications for business would follow from such a right? Given Brundtland's shift from growth to development, and from preferences to needs, what is good food and what type of food do humans need? What happens when needs conflict with strongly held preferences about food, and what is the responsibility of business when consumer markets exist for unhealthy fast foods? In a world in which both hunger and obesity pose significant health risks to millions of people, what does a just distribution of food require? How does the demand for water of agricultural business in California's central valley compare to the demand for water of Las Vegas' entertainment industry?

The green revolution mentioned earlier was created by advances in synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and in hybridization—genetically modified—crops. Given that we are barely meeting the food needs of the present by using such technologies, is it realistic to think that moving to a more environmentally benign agriculture would result in anything other than widespread starvation and malnourishment? Yet there are real and significant risks, to both present and future generations associated with most elements of modern, high-tech agricultural practices. What are the responsibilities for business in growing, processing, distributing, marketing, and recycling food? What are the responsibilities for business to ensure food safety and food security? What limits ought to be placed on corporate ownership, patenting, and control of life forms, food crops, and GMO foods and pesticides? There is also an entire range of issues at the boundary between a wider environmentalism and Brundtland's conservationist ethics, many of which come to the fore surrounding food.

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I earlier argued for a *prima facie* justification for favoring the conservationist ethic over wider biocentric preservationism when present needs are at stake. But, when is that *prima facie* justification overridden? When, and under what circumstances, should the preservation of endangered species trump economic development? Consider how seldom business has been brought into long-standing ethics literature on future generations, hunger, famine relief, and air and water pollution. Much of this literature was focused on individual or governmental responsibilities, but what are the implications for business in these areas? More generally, what implications for business would follow from an account of needs (I would suggest food, water, energy, shelter as the big four) that are mostly likely threatened by environmental mismanagement?

Empirical Research

Colleagues working in the social science side of business ethics will find a wealth of data in the thousands of annual sustainability reports issued by corporations across the world. The field of business ethics has much to contribute by mining this data for best practice, case studies, missteps, greenwashing, and new models for doing business. We need more ethical analyses of the reasons why firms choose to adopt a sustainability agenda, and the business, social, environmental, and ethical results of such choices. More theoretically sophisticated, longitudinal and cross-cultural studies on the effects, financial and otherwise, of a corporate commitment to sustainable practices need to be produced and published.

Major global firms such as Walmart, Unilever, Royal Dutch Shell, and Norvo Nordisk have made well-publicized commitments to sustainability. Digging into the practice of such firms, and comparing their performance with competitors, would contribute much to the field.

Management scholars can help us understand the organizational-level implications that follow for business from the macro level model of global economic development. This question deserves imaginative work from those working in both normative and empirical domains of business ethics. It would be difficult to imagine a better challenge for entrepreneurs and business leaders than to actualize the business opportunities created by a sustainable economy.

Is it time for business to jump of the sustainability bandwagon? No, but it is time to focus the global attention being paid to sustainability in order to help create businesses that can meet present and future needs without jeopardizing future generations by destroying the very biosphere that they will need to live a decent human life.

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NOTES

1. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 15. Hereafter WCED.

2. One sustainable management textbook, *Sustainability: Essentials for Business*, cites over 500 different uses and definitions of sustainability or activities modified by the word sustainable, Scott T. Young and Kanwalroop Kathy Dhanda, *Sustainability: Essentials for Business* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012).

3. Ernst Ligteringen, keynote speech at the GRI Global Conference on Sustainability and Reporting, 22 May 2013, as reported in *Sustainability Reporting: The Time is Now*, Ernst and Young, p. 13, accessed January 15, 2016, http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-Sustainability-reporting-the-time-is-now/$FILE/EY-Sustainability-reporting-the-time-is-now.pdf.

4. The Brundtland Report did acknowledge that there are other reasons to adopt a wider environmentalism. "But utility aside, there are also moral, ethical, cultural, aesthetic, and purely scientific reasons for conserving wild beings" (WCED, par. 53).

5. Austin was concerned with the misuse of the words "real" and "reality." Describing something as real calls out for further information. Real what? A real duck as opposed to a decoy? Real cream, as opposed to artificial? Removed from specific contexts, "reality" was meaningless. So, too, I would claim about sustainable and sustainability. J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), Chapter 7.

6. *The Value of Sustainability Reporting*: A Study Conducted by Ernst and Young and the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship (2013), 3, accessed January 15, 2016, www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY_-_Value_of_sustainability_reporting/$FILE/EY-Value-of-Sustainability-Reporting.pdf.

7. Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes, *Annual Review* (2002), 3, accessed January 15, 2016, http://www.sustainability-indices.com/images/review-presentation-2002.pdf.

8. Robesco statement on "Corporate Sustainability," accessed January 15, 2016, http://www.sustainability-indices.com/sustainability-assessment/corporate-sustainability.jsp.

9. Importantly, this is why a risk-management strategy differs from making the so-called "business case" for sustainability. The latter case accepts the ends of environmental protection while making a financial case to strive for that end. The former case judges whether the end of environmental protection is worth the risk taken to achieve it and is open to the possibility that it is not. This distinction is similar to the distinction between cost-benefit and cost-effective strategies. In one case—cost-effective and the business case for sustainable practices—the ends are granted and we look for best means; in the other—cost-benefit and risk-management—the ends themselves are determined by the best costs/risks ratio.

10. Global Reporting Index G4: *Sustainability Reporting Guidelines 2015,* 3, accessed January 19, 2016, https://www.globalreporting.org/resourcelibrary/GRIG4-Part1-Reporting-Principles-and-Standard-Disclosures.pdf.

11. Ibid. p. 52

12. Ibid. p. 64

13. Society For Human Resource Management, "Sustainable Workplace Practices," accessed October 12, 2015, http://www.shrm.org/templatestools/hrqa/pages/sustainableworkplacepracticesandhowtheybenefitthebottomline.aspx#sthash.Y8HffmhY.dpuf. Retrieved 12 October 2015

14. American Institute of CPAs, "Sustainability Accounting and Reporting, accessed January 18, 2016, http://www.aicpa.org/InterestAreas/BusinessIndustryAndGovernment/Resources/Sustainability/Pages/SustainabilityFAQs.aspx.

15. Accessed November 11, 2014, http://www.un.org/en/ga/president/65/issues/sustdev.shtml.

16. "The social capitalist behind the phrase "triple bottom line" talks about why some greenwashing is good," by Jesse Finfrock, Mother Jones, November/December 2008

17. See, for example, Holmes Rolston, *Conserving Natural Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 84-88.

18. (GR4 guidelines, May 2013), 54.

19. Brundtland, para 53.

20. The known cancer and reproductive claims are from Office of Environmental Health and Hazard Assessment, *List of chemicals known to the state to cause cancer or reproductive toxicity* (Sacramento, CA: California Environmental Protection Agency, 1998). The residue claim is from Solomon, G., et.al., *Pesticides and Human Health: A Resource for Health Care Professionals* (Santa Monica, CA: Physicians for Social Responsibility, 2000), 9, which cites three separate scientific studies.

21. (Staff) (2009) Global Prevalence Of Vitamin A Deficiency in Populations At Risk 1995–2005 WHO Global Database on Vitamin A Deficiency. Geneva, World Health Organization, ISBN 978-92-4-159801-9, Retrieved 10 October 2011.

22. Two examples of such misanthropic environmentalism are Edward Abbey and Dave Foreman. In *Desert Solitaire* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968) Abbey says "I'd rather kill a man than a snake." In *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), Foreman says "An individual human life has no more intrinsic value than does an individual grizzly bear life. Human suffering resulting from drought and famine in Ethiopia is tragic, yes, but the destruction there of other creatures and habitat is even more tragic."

23. To make this point, Aldo Leopold famously offers an example in The Land Ethics of disassembling a watch. As in the disruption of any ecosystem, one should be extremely leery if upon reassembling a watch one discovers a leftover part.

24. See for example, Ramachandra Guha's criticism of western calls for preservation in "Radical Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (Spring 1989): 71-84.

25. Perhaps the best single review of the philosophical issues raised by food, is *The Philosophy of Food*, ed. David M. Kaplan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). A very comprehensive resource for ethics and food can be found at the University of North Texas website on food ethics: http://www.food.unt.edu/.

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